STUDY GUIDE

The Great Gatsby

A complete reader's companion

by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Standalone

Summary · Characters · Themes · Analysis · Quotes

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Plot Full summary and analysis	**Characters** Cast analysis	**Themes** Major ideas explained	**Discussion** Questions for study

About the Book

The Great Gatsby is F. Scott Fitzgerald's third novel and the work most often named when American readers are asked to name the Great American Novel. Published in 1925 to modest sales, it became a canonical text after Fitzgerald's death and has been in continuous classroom rotation since the 1950s. Its 180 pages contain virtually every thematic concern Americans recognise as their own.

Fitzgerald wrote it during the boom that gives the Jazz Age its name; he was 28, drinking heavily, living in France, and aware that his own marriage to Zelda Sayre mirrored, in uncomfortable ways, the Gatsby–Daisy story he was inventing. The novel's tight first-person frame, controlled symbolism, and elegiac final cadences make it a model text for studying narrative voice and structure.

Author	F. Scott Fitzgerald
First published	1925
Series	Standalone
Genre	Modernist novel / American literary fiction
Setting	Long Island (West Egg and East Egg) and New York City, summer 1922
POV / form	First person, retrospective (Nick Carraway)
Content notes	Adultery; off-page violence; period racial language

Plot Summary

Nick Carraway, a young bond salesman from the Midwest, moves to West Egg, Long Island, in the summer of 1922. His cousin Daisy and her husband Tom Buchanan live across the bay in East Egg, the older and richer side. Nick's neighbour in West Egg, a man named Jay Gatsby, throws lavish weekly parties to which no one is exactly invited and from which the host remains aloof.

Gatsby's purpose, Nick discovers, is to recover Daisy, with whom he was in love before the war and before she married Tom. Gatsby's wealth, his house, the parties, the carefully cultivated mystery, are all instruments of that single project. Nick agrees to broker a reunion. For a brief period, Daisy and Gatsby resume their affair under Tom's increasingly suspicious eye.

The plot's pivot is a hot afternoon at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan, where Tom forces a confrontation, Gatsby's history is partially exposed, and Daisy is asked to declare that she has never loved Tom. She cannot. Driving home with Gatsby, she runs over Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress, at the Valley of Ashes. Gatsby chooses to take the blame.

Myrtle's husband George, told by Tom that the car was Gatsby's, shoots Gatsby in his pool and then himself. Nick organises a sparsely attended funeral, returns to the Midwest with the Buchanans' carelessness as his last image, and writes the book the reader has just finished — closing on the famous green-light passage about boats borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Major Characters

Nick Carraway

The narrator and the novel's moral instrument. A Yale-educated Midwesterner whose claim to honesty is itself one of the novel's questions, Nick is both inside the story and the device by which Fitzgerald keeps it controlled.

Jay Gatsby

Born James Gatz in North Dakota, reinvented through bootlegging and association with Meyer Wolfshiem. Gatsby's greatness, in the novel's calculation, is the scale and purity of his belief that the past can be repeated.

Daisy Buchanan

Gatsby's lost love and Nick's cousin. Daisy is sometimes read as victim and sometimes as careless agent; Fitzgerald lets both readings stand. Her voice — "full of money" — is the novel's most quoted detail.

Tom Buchanan

Daisy's husband. Old money, ex-football player, openly racist, casually violent. Tom is the residue of the world Gatsby is trying to enter and Fitzgerald's portrait of the kind of person that world produces.

Jordan Baker

A professional golfer and Nick's summer-long love interest. Her dishonesty is mild, but Fitzgerald uses it to complicate Nick's claims to a higher moral position.

Myrtle and George Wilson

The novel's working-class casualties. Myrtle is Tom's mistress; George runs a garage in the Valley of Ashes. Their deaths are the cost the novel's careless rich shed without consequence.

Major Themes

The American Dream and Its Failure

The novel's most-taught theme. Gatsby's self-invention is the dream at its most ambitious; his death and the Buchanans' survival is the dream's verdict on itself.

Class and Old vs New Money

East Egg and West Egg are the geography of the same problem. The novel insists that the line between old and new wealth is real, defended by violence, and unbridgeable by money alone.

Illusion, Memory, and Time

Gatsby's project is to repeat the past. The novel's stance is that the project is impossible, but that the wanting is what the book finds worth writing about.

Carelessness and Consequence

Nick's verdict on Tom and Daisy — that they smashed up things and people and let other people clean up the mess — is the novel's working definition of moral failure in the class he is documenting.

Key Motifs

• **The green light.** At the end of Daisy's dock; the novel's master symbol of pursued and receding desire.

• **The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg.** The faded billboard over the Valley of Ashes; God, conscience, or the dead American eye that watches without judging.

• **The Valley of Ashes.** The industrial wasteland between West Egg and the city — the visible cost of the wealth on either side.

• **Cars.** Status, modernity, and instruments of the novel's deaths.

• **The colour gold and yellow.** Wealth and its rot; daffodils, champagne, dust.

Discussion Questions

• Is Nick a reliable narrator? Catalogue the places where his honesty seems to slip and assess the cumulative effect.

• Why does Fitzgerald call Gatsby "great"? Take the title as a serious critical claim and argue for or against it.

• Daisy's voice is "full of money." Why is that the line that finally explains her to Gatsby — and to Nick?

• Compare Tom's racism (the Goddard book) with Gatsby's self-invention. What does the novel suggest about who can remake themselves in America?

• Read the Valley of Ashes alongside the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. What does Fitzgerald do with industrial landscape that earlier novelists did not?

• The novel ends on the green light and "boats against the current." What is the function of this elegiac close in a book otherwise so observed and ironic?

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